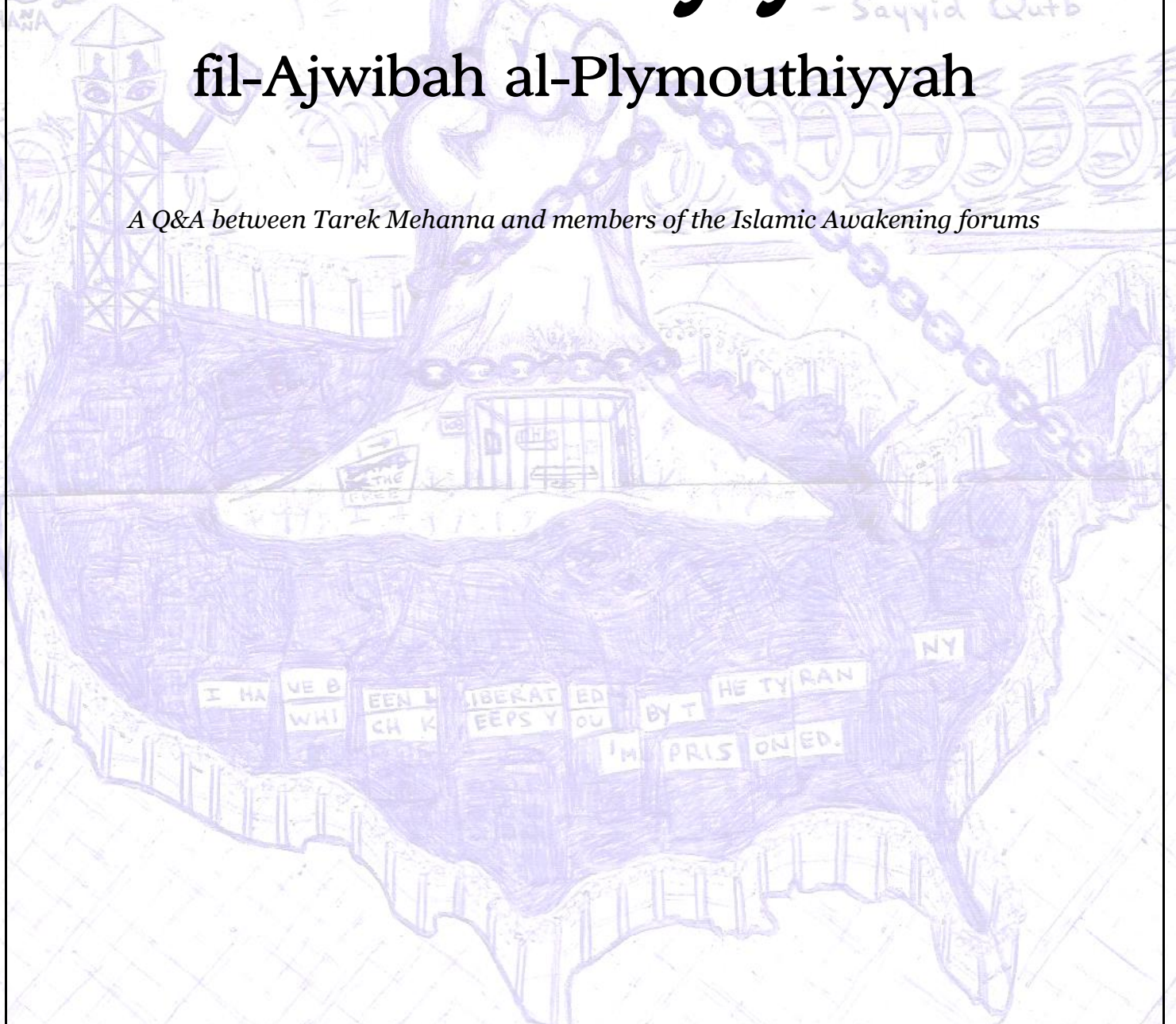


Ad-Durar as-Saniyyah

fil-Ajwibah al-Plymouthiyyah

A Q&A between Tarek Mehanna and members of the Islamic Awakening forums



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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Introduction

This document consists of two interviews between members of the Islamic Awakening forums and Tarek Mehanna. Tarek Mehanna is a 29 year old American-born Muslim Egyptian. Highly educated, he holds a doctorate in pharmacy from the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy. He is a devout, tolerant Muslim who is not only respected in the local Islamic and interfaith communities, but who also gives back to his community by fulfilling the roles of brother, educator, mentor, scholar, and friend. Tarek is described by those who know him well as humble, reserved, warm, peaceful, charismatic, knowledgeable, and dedicated.

For several years Tarek has been a victim of FBI surveillance and harassment. The Boston FBI recognized that he was a religious Muslim who was active in the local Islamic community, had earned the respect of many, and was beloved to the youth. The FBI recognized in Tarek an individual who is intelligent, charismatic, influential and trusted by many in the local Islamic community. They decided that they wanted Tarek on their side, and began to approach him in an effort to recruit him as an informant. Their objective was to secure Tarek as a tool to corroborate any FBI claims or accusations against members of the community that might arise, at the discretion of the FBI. Of course, Tarek flat out refused to backstab his fellow Muslim brothers and sisters, a decision that did not sit well at all with the FBI.

The FBI then proceeded to repeatedly approach Tarek over the coming months, each time pressuring him more and more to collaborate with them. This pressure most often came in the form of blackmail; Tarek was told that unless he consented to cooperating with the FBI, they would continue finding new ways to disrupt his life and to deprive him of a sense of security. He was told outright by interrogators that they knew he was innocent, but that they would not be satisfied with his refusal to cooperate. Regardless of whether their methods were unethical, coercive, or failed to respect his civil rights, the FBI were quite fortunate in catching an opportunity to arrest Tarek in 2008 based on a weak accusation of issuing "false statements" to a federal officer. After two months of imprisonment, his court-appointed attorney, Jay Carney, jr., was able to negotiate a bail settlement of \$1,250,000. Tarek was subsequently released after this absurdly inflated amount was paid by his parents, who were desperate to have him return home safely.

During the *Fajr* hours of October 21st, 2009, FBI agents showed up at the Mehanna home doorstep at 5:00AM in the morning. Despite the lack of ANY new evidence since the prior arrest, the agents came with an arrest warrant and Tarek was arrested again. He is currently being held in solitary confinement, 23-hour lockdown facing accusations of aiding and abetting terrorism. All of these FALSE charges have been fabricated by paid FBI informants.

First interview

May 2010 / Jumada al-Awwal 1431

Question: How can one get on to your *du'a* list?

Answer: Very simple. Call up the prison's director of security and smooth-talk him into allowing me to ship my books in from home, and I'll see what I can do.

Question: What do you miss most of life outside prison?

Answer: I'll often find myself thinking: *'It's been seven months since I've prayed in jama'ah,'* or since I heard a *khutbah*, or shook hands with my brothers from the *masjid*, or just hung out with people. The human being is a social creature. We were designed to be part of a social structure of one sort or another. When that structure is suddenly removed or altered, for the worse, you can't help but miss it.

Also, the inability to serve my parents while here makes me wish I had done more for them while on the outside. To run their errands, to buy them gifts, just to make them a cup of tea – if you are reading this and have living parents, take heed and treat them as if this might be your last day with them!

I'm very much an outdoors person (not exactly the prison type), and I love to hike; I would often grab my iPod and spend hours exploring natural scenery, forests, and trails locally. Surrounded by concrete and metal, those moments now seem much more savory where there was nothing to breathe but fresh air, nothing to see but hills, greenery, streams, clear sky and red sun, and nothing to hear but the distant chirping of birds, the running of clear water, and the soft breeze making its way through the leaves high above. It was these moments in which I truly felt free, truly felt tranquil, surrounded by pure beauty. Huge contrast!

In truth, it's difficult to list what I miss, because a prisoner will feel nostalgic about everything good on the outside simply on account of it being on the outside! He will long for anything that will remind him of what now seems like nothing more than a dream, or a previous life. For example, I'm not a coffee drinker, but I began buying it from commissary because the taste reminds me of how it smelled on the outside.

Question: How much stronger has this experience made you in comparison to life before imprisonment (in *imaan* and otherwise)?

Answer: If attachment to the *dunya* is a face, then prison is the boot kicking it into the ground, over and over and over again. It's like going cold turkey in here from attachment to the frivolities of life. I've got a blanket, a thin pillow, some books, my hygienics, stationary items, the clothes on my back, and I get three small meals a day. That's what I possess at the moment. That's my *dunya*. On the outside, we are fooled into the illusion that we are somehow in possession of power; that everything is at our fingertips creates a sort of drunken state where we forget our status as slaves of our Creator, in varying degrees. At times, we need to be cut down to size by being cut away from this distorted existence, and channel our attention to Allah. When you have nothing and nobody at your service, it is only then that you become conscious, in the full sense, of the One Who was there all along, and you find yourself

channeling your dependence towards Him now that everything else is out of the way. It's said that this is why the Arabs were the perfect carriers of Islam at first: their desert lifestyle was such that if, for example, they ran out of water in the middle of the desert, they would have no choice but to have *tawakkul* on Allah due to absence of men and material to provide a way out of such predicaments.

So, *imaan*-wise, this is where I stand. The nature of prison is similar to that of the desert in its scarcity of resources and material comfort. Allah strikes us with such deprivation in order to bring us back to our senses and remind us of our status as needy slaves, as in surat al-An'am, v.42: ***{"And We seized them with poverty and calamity so that they would humble themselves."}***

In addition, I've acquired more patience. You can't escape patience in a place like this. For example, on the outside, you are able to make a phone call or send an e-mail and have a near instant communication. An inquiry you send out in the morning will at most be responded to by night. Imagine, then, being forced to shift to snail mail, where simple inquiries can take days to weeks! If I send out a letter to any given person asking how they are doing or asking for something, and that person responds immediately upon receiving that letter from me, I will not get an answer for roughly a week from the time I sent out the initial message. So, imagine shifting from the world of Facebook, Twitter, IM, and so on to such primitive means of communication, where you are forced to be patient.

I've also developed better time management skills. As mentioned before, I'm allowed out of my cell for an hour each day. In this hour, I stuff my cardiovascular workout, my shower, my phone calls, my uniform exchange, and my commissary order. When I say an hour, I mean an hour. I must plan by the minute in order to avoid wasting any of my rec time (which is all the more difficult without a clock or watch). I was once using the phone only to have the call disabled by a guard because my time had run out! So I apportion the appropriate amount of time to each of my tasks to avoid running out of time, because once that hour is up, I won't be coming out of that cell until the next day.

There's another aspect of rec time that builds discipline, and that is the fact that each day, it is randomly picked by the guards. One day I will be out at 3pm, the next day I will be called out at 8am. This is something I have little control over, and it's good to face this day after day because it resembles the reality of life where you have to adjust yourself to deal with the circumstances as opposed to adjusting the circumstances to your preference all the time. So, the random rec system can be quite useful when it comes to *al-Qada' wal-Qadar*. This could be a very long reply, but these are a few examples of how I've grown stronger in here, الحمد لله.

Question: If you could meet someone from Islamic Awakening forums, who would it be?

Answer: I can't think of anyone on IA whom I would not be honored to meet.

Question: Had any good dreams you wish to share?

Answer: About a week ago, I dreamt that I was taking over a house. Now, this house was occupied by some oppressors and I was basically going into each room and kicking them out and establishing my own presence there. As soon as I had ejected every last one of them, I awoke.

A few months before that, I dreamt that I had been released from prison and was at a *masjid* giving a *khutbah*. Suddenly, I noticed one of the *murtad* (mis)informants in my case walking in, bearing a look of utter humiliation and disgrace on his face. Someone in the crowd recognized him and shouted: *'There he is! That's him!'* and they all got up in the middle of my *khutbah* to rush him and, you know, make him feel unwelcome. After he had been kicked out of the *masjid*, everyone came back and calmly sat down in front of me. Then I awoke.

I've had too many dreams of the sort in here, but these two stood out.

Question: What is your favourite dish in prison?

Answer: I've been applying for some time now to receive 'Halal' meals, but to no avail. So I don't eat the majority of what comes my way and I end up trading for fruits.

From what I do eat, the best breakfast tray here is the cornflakes-type cereal (since it involves no real preparation from their kitchen). The best lunch I've ever had was my own concoction: I would take some banana slices they'd serve and mix them in with boiled rice they'd provide as a side. The best dinner tray is the fish patty (served on Fridays).

As a protein source, I order a jar of peanut butter and wheat toast, and three packets of tuna fish every few weeks, from the commissary.

Once I eventually start receiving the halal trays, I'll update you on the food situation. But until then, my diet consists of the aforementioned, as well as all non-meat portions of the trays.

Question: What is the one thing you look for when you wake up every day in your cell? Also, has this experience made you less willing to join online forums when you're released *insha'Allah*?

Answer: This is important, because the most tasking aspect of life here is routine. Very little changes from day to day. I woke up today and did what I did yesterday, which is also what I will do tomorrow. I wake up in the same cell, stare at the same wall, hear the same sounds, wear the same clothes, see the same guards, smell the same scents (not very pleasant), eat the same food, and perform the same "recreational" activities in my hour outside my cell. So, it's hard to distinguish one day from another. The days consist of a routine that keeps on repeating over and over again indefinitely. I sometimes feel as if we're frozen in time here, in some black hole or hidden pocket of the universe where everything just passes us by. The blandness is reflected on the faces and attitudes of the guards, who only come in for eight hour shifts. So, how much more would it affect those of us who are here 24/7 against their will?

So, there is a desire for anything to serve as a crack in the wall of that mundane existence; anything to distinguish from one day to another; anything to remind us that we are alive, and don't just exist; anything to serve as a connection to what is beyond these concrete walls. The best way to do this is through reading. Each book is like its own world that provides an escape. Lights are out by midnight here, but I often stay up reading in the glow of the lights outside the unit or the floodlights outside the prison. A pile of books is a pile of worlds that I can travel to day after day, meeting hundreds of different characters, living in the most distant of lands. One day, I'm in Harlem, NY, the next I'm in Guantanamo Bay, the next I'm in Vietnam, the next I'm in Wisconsin, the next in South Africa, then London, then all over the Middle East, then India, then the Moon, and so on. So, a book is the closest I can get to set-

ting foot out of prison due to the mental escape and the break that the variety in subject and content provides from the monotonous nature of my environment. So, to answer your question directly, when I'm in the middle of a gripping book, that makes me eager to get out of bed and continue my brief visit to whatever world it has to offer. With the body restrained, the mind is hungry for activity.

The second highlight of life in here that adds flavor to the days is to receive mail. There is nothing that snaps a prisoner out of the repetitiveness of his environment than to know that someone somewhere in the world sat down and put pen to paper for him. For the duration of the time that letter is in his hands being read, he is not in prison, least of all because the words are new, different, organic, and specifically directed to the reader. They remind him of his individuality. Nelson Mandela recalled the effect of mail on him in prison: 'When letters did arrive, they were cherished. A letter was like the summer rain that could make even the desert bloom...'

Question: If any, what has been your best *da'wah* experience?

Answer: My contact with others is limited to speaking for a few minutes from behind a metal cell door, since I'm not allowed to be out with any other inmate. But even within this capacity, I've had some notable encounters.

One guy was constantly stressed out; a dread-locked Rastafarian type. So, I'm kicking him some spiritual talk, he's all into it, and after numerous conversations, he says: 'You know what, I'm ready for this. I want to become a Muslim like you.' I told him: 'Not so fast my friend. You need to know that it requires commitment and conviction. This isn't a joke or something to jump into without knowing its reality.' He replied, 'Definitely. But just tell how to do it.' I told him, and as soon as I did, he started rubbing his hands together and says: 'Aw, man... I can't wait to hit up those hookah bars in New York that those Muslims run!' I just sighed and shook my head...

There was also a Puerto Rican who was transferred in from a prison in nearby Norfolk (where Malcolm X had been held back in the day), and after talking for a bit, he revealed to me that he had joined the Nation of 'Islam' (Kufr). So I told him: 'You're not even black! What on Earth are you doing with the NOI?? Here, let me tell you about the real *tawhid*...' And thanks to Allah alone, he said the *shahadah* and is learning how to properly make *salah*.

I spoke to a Jamaican guy who was curious about the *Din*, and after some time, he told me: 'Look, I believe in all you're saying, but man! I love smokin' weed, bro. I can't live without it!' I replied: 'Come on, you're going to let a plant prevent you from the truth?' With him and others, it was tragic that the only barrier between them and Islam was the captivity of their hearts to drugs, alcohol, and fornication. So, I told him also: 'It's better to be a believer who uses drugs than to be a non-believer who uses drugs,' and I left it at that.

Generally, it is much easier to discuss religion with those in prison than with those on the outside due to two factors: i) the desperate circumstances of the inmate, and ii) separation from worldly pleasures. These factors bring them down to Earth and back to their senses about what truly matters in life, and such a person will be more receptive to spiritual discussions than a co-worker or next door neighbor might be. This observation really got me thinking about how truly corrupt the outside environment is to the heart if it takes a person being physically removed from it to recognize the importance and role of faith. You guys live in that

environment at the moment! So, it's a good idea to constantly engage in *dhikr* to protect your hearts from that pollution you encounter on a daily basis.

Question: Have you thought about writing a book or two?

Answer: I already sent out periodic essays describing what it's like in here, and beyond that, my case isn't as eventful as some of the others.

However, I did have an idea that I hope you would consider, and that is that a book should be compiled of the stories of all those arrested in the 'War on Terror' in the West (America, Canada, Europe, Australia). A list should be made of each known prisoner, and they should be contacted and asked to write a chapter to contribute in which they describe their experience, offer thoughts, and so on. Once compiled and published, such a comprehensive volume will serve as a historical document of this era in Islamic history, and can also be presented to the *kuffar* as a record of their history so that they can see what is being done to us in the name of "protecting" them.

The proceeds from such a project should go towards helping the families of Muslim prisoners with legal fees, debt, and other expenses related to their incarceration.

Question: How confident are you that you will win your case in court?

Answer: Confident enough to have written the article posted this past '*Id al-Adha*'¹, every word of which I fully uphold and believe in with certainty. So, if you want to know my mind-set and expectation, go back and read that essay carefully.

It's important also to keep in mind that this case is nothing more than revenge from the US government. The federal agents who arrested me were the same ones who had previously attempted to convince me to work for them, and they are the same ones who specified that they would find something to charge me with if I refused. So, when I did refuse, they arrested me with the charge of "giving a false statement". I was then released on bail, and they placed restrictive conditions on me for nearly a year in hopes that I would be pressured into changing my mind. When nothing came of that, their frustration led them to decide to take me in again and add more charges. In order to provide cover and justification for this, they came up with the sensational 'shopping mall' story. So, they will now spend millions and millions of tax-payer dollars taking me to trial in order to save face, as opposed to me having being caught in some "terrorist act".

Question: How long do you expect to be in prison?

Answer: In the story of the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) told the Companions, based on his dream, that they would make '*Umrah*'. So, when they set out for Makkah and were prevented by the pagans from the '*Umrah*', Umar became disheartened and said to Abu Bakr: 'Didn't he say that we would make *tawaf* around the *ka'bah*?' Abu Bakr said: 'Did he tell you it would be this year?' Umar replied: 'No.' Abu Bakr said: 'You will make *tawaf* around it...' And the following year, they were performing '*Umrah*', just as the Prophet had promised.

¹ The article can be found [here](#).

So, Allah had promised them that they would complete the *'Umrah*. It happened, but on Allah's terms, not those of 'Umar or even the Prophet himself. The fulfilling of the promise was 100% certain, but the 'when' was known only to Allah.

Such is the case with the question of how long I will be here. All I know is that Allah promised that if I do the right thing, stay true to my principles, and have full certainty and reliance on His Aid, He will make me victorious in the end. The 'when' aspect is not my concern. All I know is that the promise itself will undoubtedly be fulfilled because it is Allah who made the promise – not once, but numerous times in the *Qur'an*. Why is it that when someone promises to meet us for dinner, we expect that we will be having dinner with that person, but when Allah promises something to us we don't take it as literally? Understand that Allah is a Living, Aware, reacting entity Who deals with you according to how you deal with Him. Did you ever read the *hadith Qudsi*: 'I am as My slave expects Me to be'? What it means is that Allah looks to how much confidence you have in Him, and deals with you accordingly. If you trust Him fully to do what you want Him to do for you, He will surely fulfill that trust and expectation. But if your trust and confidence in Him are so-so, then what trust is there for Him to fulfill? None, and that is when you are left in the gutter. It's like a bungee jump of the heart – all or none; an internal test to see if you will put your life in His Hands. Some pass, some fail.

Question: If released, what are your plans for life?

Answer: When, not if, I am released (*in Sha' Allah*), I will pick up from where I left off.

Question: Have any guards at the prison shown interest in Islam?

Answer: I once tried explaining to a guard what *'Id al-Adha* was all about, and how Prophet Ibrahim fits in, and he ended up having no clue who he even was.

Another guard thought I'd be interested to know that he prefers "the whores of this world" to "that 70 virgins bullsh@t." Oh boy... overflowing with wisdom!

So, you see what I'm dealing with.

Question: Have any of them apologized to you while they lock the cell?

Answer: No, but quite a few have expressed their opinion that I don't belong here.

Question: If we could help the other prisoners in any specific way, what do you recommend us to do (through your experiences)?

Answer: You need to have short-term and long-term goals.

Short-term goals include tending to the prisoner's well-being and strength while incarcerated. This is best accomplished by continuous writing (brothers need to do more than they have been in this department) to let them rest assured that they are on the minds of their *Ummah*. Without letters, what other way will they know this? There is no Facebook, forum threads, or other means of access to a support structure in solitary confinement, folks. You need to reach out and directly boost that morale. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who spent time in a Nazi prison for an assassination attempt on Hitler, He wrote in one of his letters: 'In prison, the door to freedom is opened from the outside,' meaning that you on the outside determine a prisoner's connection to his/her *Ummah*, in our context.

Another short-term goal is to tend to the prisoner's family. If you were to ask one of them, you would find them in debt due to legal fees, or having to drive long distances for a visit, or having being abandoned by their communities due to fear, or being emotionally unprepared to deal with the prospect of separation from their loved one, or needing someone to just show some warmth! Find the closest such family to you, pick one method of helping, and make it constant, indefinite service from you to them: call once a week to chat; buy them groceries; offer to drive them to a visit; offer to babysit; offer some financial help; do something!! And make it constant, and not just a promise made in a moment of emotion. BE THERE for them, so that they are strong enough to be there for their loved one!

As for long-term goals, this is that the prisoner is eventually released. This occurs in two stages: i) raising awareness, and ii) exerting influence. For these, we have to learn to become political activists. A big difference I notice between Muslims in America and those in other parts of the West is the almost complete lack of activist mentality on our part. You will find Muslims here who are 'practising', might be sympathetic, will donate to a legal fund, visit, write a letter – but have little to no experience when it comes to actively working for a religious-political cause. We need to change that, and once again I'm aware that there are already efforts established in this regard among some Muslims in the West, but speaking from experience in America, I feel this advice is needed.

We can learn very useful lessons from leftist activists who have decades of experience campaigning for the release of the over a hundred political prisoners held in America. Specifically, they have focused on freeing political prisoners who are part of the African-American, Native-American, and Puerto Rican independence movements. Just like with the Muslims today, these faced augmented sentences for their convictions because of their political beliefs and the government's fear-stoking. The similarities are quite astounding, and if you look at the cases of Mumia Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier, Jalil Muntaqim, Herman Bell, and others, you will see that they faced the same repression and FBI tactics that we as Muslims face today under the PATRIOT act, Anti-Terror Legislation, and so on, and these groups have had numerous successes in pressuring the government to free political prisoners who would otherwise be serving life sentences, as well as in shutting down lockdown units (that now exist in the form of Supermax in Florence, CO, CMU in Terre Haute, IN, and CMU in Marion, IL). This is a process that will take some very dedicated people with brilliant minds and a lack of attachment to comfort. It will take a long time and incredible effort, but if we don't do it, who will? We can't just sit and twiddle our thumbs.

So, the first step is awareness, and this is best done through an activist organization formed specifically dedicated to the cause of these Muslim prisoners; something that can be pointed to as a symbol of the struggle to get them out of prison. Through these organizations, everyone should have their delegated task. Some will put together and hand out petitions, some will send out e-mails, some will be responsible for organizing educational events, some will make telephone calls to those sympathetic, some will speak to the press, and ALL should learn to engage in basic interaction and out-reach skills, such as knocking on a neighbor's door and telling the story of a prisoner, or telling co-workers or fellow students at school; we have to talk candidly and widely about the people whom are disappearing into the prison system on an almost weekly basis. We have to make the world realize that these are real people with real families, hopes, dreams, and pains. We have to expose how they were ensnared by broad, vague laws that are meant to turn the most insignificant of actions into crimes to be

imprisoned for. We have to expose the government's constant use of agent provocateurs, and have people ask themselves: if there was a genuine "domestic terrorism" threat, why would the government have to resort to the use of agent provocateurs who create plots where none would've otherwise existed (as in the Fort Dix, Herald Square, and other cases)? Why would the government have to come out with sensationalist media fodder to scare the public and then not even charge with the accusation? Jose Padilla was burst onto the media as the one who plotted to set off a "dirty bomb", Aafia Siddiqui as the one carrying explosive chemicals with blue prints for the NYC subway to be attacked, I was brought out as the alleged mall shooter – but none of us was ever charged with these. Why? If there was a genuine "threat" that necessitated these oppressive laws in the name of "protecting" innocents, why would the government feel the need to resort to the use of agent provocateurs or fabricate accusations to scare the public? These questions need to be raised to the Western public on a massive scale in order to get them thinking about what the true motive is behind all of our brothers and sisters being made to languish in federal prisoners under draconian conditions and sentences. (American Muslims lag behind severely in such efforts.)

A lot of this takes place in the awareness stage, and through a well-run, established, focused organization with members who believe in this and are willing to give precious time and sweat for it. This will start off small, and will slowly grow and expand as more and more people from all walks of society begin to receive a clear, educated explanation and depiction of what is happening in their name. When this grows, more noise will be made. Those in power are more likely to listen to those who make the most noise. Malcolm X related this in his autobiography:

'I learned early that crying out in protest could accomplish things. My older brothers and sisters had started school when, sometimes, they would come in and ask for a buttered biscuit or something and my mother, impatiently, would tell them no. But I would cry out and make a fuss until I got what I wanted. I remember well how my mother asked me why I couldn't be a nice boy like Wilfred; but I would think to myself that Wilfred, for being so nice and quiet, often stayed hungry. So early in life, I had learned that if you want something, you had better made some noise.'

So, if enough noise is made awareness-wise, it can reach the point where demands can be made and decisions influenced in a manner that maintains our dignity, and after a long, hard struggle, we will see the results worked so hard to obtain. But in order to see results, you have to make this your calling and purpose. You have to feel responsible for your *Ummah* just as you would feel responsible for your family.

And then you have to work with others to come up with a plan.

Question: What did you feel when you - for the first time - saw the FBI approach you and raid your home? And how did you feel the 2nd time in comparison?

Answer: The first time I was arrested, I wasn't at home. It was at the airport as I was about to board a plane to Saudi Arabia (I had gotten a job there). How did I feel? Well, it wasn't pleasant to be handled by '*uluj*'. But I think some people inadvertently attach to them the *Si-fat* of Allah (Knowing, Hearing, Seeing, Controlling, etc), and we forget that they are human beings who get sick, die, go to the bathroom, etc. like everyone else. *Fir'awn* claimed to be the lord of the worlds, yet his life was snuffed out by some H₂O molecule that got stuck in his lungs.

So, we have to stop looking at these people as gods who hold our fates in their hands. Their very hearts cannot beat without Allah's permission. That's how I felt.

Question: What is $(13 \times 135) + (579 \times 92 + 246)$ rounded up to the nearest 10,000?

Answer: 60,000.

Question: Please give the molecular formula and structure of Butane

Answer: You got me there... I haven't had a chemistry class in years!

Question: Do you ever receive any hate mail?

Answer: Nope, not that I've seen.

Question: Approximately how many letters do you receive weekly?

Answer: Sometimes one, sometimes 5, sometimes more, sometimes less. It's random and I deeply appreciate each and every one that comes my way. May Allah reward all who write.

Question: Who was your favourite *Sahabi* and why?

Answer: These days, I admire Abu Dharr al-Ghifari. Abu Dharr was a no-nonsense man of strength and consistency. Before accepting Islam, he was a highway robber, and would attack even during the Sacred Months that all of the Arabs respected. Why? Because, in his mind, it wasn't logical that he would be a highway robber for eight months of the year, and then pretend not to be one for the remaining four months! This consistency, applied here with an evil deed, carried over into his Islam. As soon as he believed, he ran over to the pagans and announced it to their faces until they beat him to a pulp. The next day, he did the same thing until they beat him to a pulp again. Why? Because he found it impossible to believe some truth in his heart and not proclaim in openly.

Today, with so much convenient ambiguity emanating from the scholars tasked with clarifying the truth, and with so many useless discussions and debates that leave the *Din* looking like one big dichotomy, we need a modern-day Abu Dharr. He would surely bring back some refreshing strength and clarity to the scene.

Question: Did Allah (swt) give you the impression that you would be imprisoned before it happened? We always ask for *khayr insha'Allah*, but did you have a strong feeling that this was going to happen to you?

Answer: My arrest was the culmination of years of FBI harassment, so I wasn't entirely shocked when it did happen. I'm aware of their dirty history, and what happened with me is entirely consistent with that history.

Any Muslim who openly rejects the house-slave mentality should expect something to eventually come his way, which makes *hijrah* all the more incumbent.

Question: In a place where there is time to reflect, have you forgiven those who have let you down, by writings or other means?

Answer: I can't say I ever felt let down, as people usually do what you expect of them.

Question: Also how is your family coping? You're in there going through the experience, but your mum's on the outside not knowing, how do you allay her fears?

Answer: One of the beautiful results of this experience is that it has boosted the *iman* of the entire family. Those of us who neglected *Qiyam al-Layl* now engage in it nightly. The *Mushaf* is read more often now. The *masjid* is visited more often now. Allah is mentioned much more frequently during the course of conversations. There is a general awakening to the *Din* that has resulted in increased seriousness about it, and a greater effort to avoid the *muharramat* that were taken lightly previously – all the direct result of this experience. I'll give a specific example. In our culture, it is unfortunately the case that many will take an oath by the Prophet ('*wan-Nabi*'). I've struggled for years to convince others in the house to put an end to this, but it's so ingrained that I was fighting a losing battle. One day, though, I called home from here, and my mother said: 'You know how you always used to make such a big fuss over saying '*wan-Nabi*' and I didn't listen? I was looking through your books the other day and found one about the dangers of *shirk*, and it was right in there. I will never say it again!' I replied: 'But that book has been there for years! I showed it to you all before!' She replied: 'Yes, but since you've been gone, I'm taking it seriously, and I don't stop reading these books!' *Allahu Akbar* – just like that, an act of *shirk* ceased in the home, all the direct result of my imprisonment.

One other way this has changed my family is that they now see the reality here. Like many Muslims, they were duped by the slogans of 'freedom', 'rights', and all those pretty words. For a long time after migrating here, they lived under that illusion, as many still do. They now have a very different view of what this is all about, after 'freedom' came knocking at their door.

Question: If Allah blesses us with *Jannah*, after the Prophets and *Sahaba* who would you like to have as neighbours or meet? And why?

Answer: These days, I've been thinking back to that early generation of Zaynab al-Ghazzali, Sayyid, Muhammad and Aminah and Hamidah Qutb, 'Abd al-Fattah Isma'il, Yusuf Hawwash – you can read about them all and what they experienced in 'Return of the Pharaoh.'

Now, the reason I chose them as my reply to your question is because their story gives the impression of their being like a tight-knit family who truly cared for one another and were like bricks in the same wall. I saw that each individual had their own unique role to play – you had the authors, you had the mother figures, you had the scholarly educators, etc. Their sense of cooperation, mutual respect, and shared pain made them so real – people who you can relate to and simultaneously look up to.

Question: Is there anything that you do not miss whilst in prison?

Answer: Watches and clocks.

The day goes by much slower when you can keep track of time.

Question: I have heard some people say the time they spent in prison were golden and they would not exchange it for the world. Would you say this is truly the case and if so how?

Answer: Yes, in the sense of what I mentioned earlier of the benefits of the experience for me. But prison is the same as school: you enjoy the end benefits, not the process itself. So, while I've gained invaluable positive transformation from prison life, it is what it is: I'm on 23-hour lockdown in the isolation unit of what is already a maximum security prison. So, don't confuse between prison life vs. potential positive results. Let's be clear: this is not a place you want to find yourself. Even the Prophet (ﷺ) said that if he were in Prophet Yusuf's place when the King's messenger came to let him out of prison, he would've accepted the offer immediately rather than wait until the King had cleared his name as Yusuf did.

So, value your freedom. That is golden.

Question: How are the other inmates with you? Is there any abuse or violence directed towards you?

Answer: I'm still in solitary confinement, so my interaction with others is a bit limited. But even within that capacity, I've never had any issues with anyone here. In fact, when I first was brought in, someone slipped a news article about me under my door and requested an auto-graph...!

Generally in prison, if you stay out of others' business, you're not an informant / rapist / pedophile, and you're not the type to look for trouble, nobody will bother you. Being religious is even better, because you are seen as one who is above what others couldn't avoid falling into. Despite being who they are, these guys do have a moral code, albeit a theoretical one.

One trait that's very important in here is to be charitable. This is the place to be as generous as you can, mainly with two things: your food and your advice. Nobody does anything for free here. Everyone has his hustle, everyone is out to gain something. So, you have a culture of deception and lack of trustworthiness permeating the prison system. It's almost a mirror image of what life was like for these guys on the street. So, I try to counter that by giving away what I can without asking for recompense. I do my own little trades with the foods I'm after (fruits, etc), but beyond that, I will give away my trays to those who I know can't afford commissary items. I also try as often as I can to just lend an ear to those who have none on the outside, or who are facing high sentences. Eventually, this has gained me the trust of the others, and they are able to distinguish between me and those who are only after self-interest, and this obviously affects how they deal with me. A few months back, one of them even wrote a letter to Obama and sent it, expressing how he felt about the injustice of my case!

Prison is a great place to gain a deeper understanding of the realities of human nature, and the role of cynicism in producing a corrupt society. Some of the people I live with here have committed horrible, horrible crimes, and have caused untold suffering to many families. But even these people can change. In fact, I've seen that they are the most open to change more than anyone else does. Unfortunately, this environment doesn't facilitate that positive and

necessary change. This is the storage facility, not a correctional facility. You cannot be institutionally healed here. The result is one of three:

- i) you somehow find the strength to change from within
- ii) you maintain your animalistic nature and never change
- iii) you commit suicide

One guy down in isolation here was a neo-Nazi in for raping and killing two black women in his effort to "protect the white race". His guilt just ate away at him day after day until he somehow got hold of a razor blade (how, I don't know) and sliced his own neck open until he bled to death. This person had nobody to offer an alternative to him. He was shown no way out but death. But others can fare better. One guy who was in for slicing half of someone's face off at a bar changed quite drastically, and he and I had some good conversations about religion. He maintains his atheism, but he is someone who chose to better himself through self-education rather than give in to his past misdeeds. The majority choose to remain as they are, unfortunately.

Question: What do/did you use on your beard in terms of shampoo / conditioner/oil etc.

Answer: Bismillah, wal-Hamdulillah, was-Salatu was-Salamu 'ala Rasulillah, wa ba'd

Indeed, this is one of the most pressing contemporary matters for the youth of our times.

So, we say:

What the people of insight have preferred and incited the *Ummah* towards is the use of what the Romans know as 'Johnson and Johnson's Baby Shampoo' due to the softness resulting from that or 'Herbal Essence' due to what it contains of beneficial ingredients that give the hair strength and shine, followed by 'Dove' (or 'White Rain') conditioner.

There is no harm in applying a touch of White Musk post-drying, if Allah Wills.

And from the great calamities of our times is that the Muslim held captive in the citadels of the Romans is limited to the cheap, Brand-X shampoo, *wa la hawla wa la quwwata illa bil-lah...*

Question: What was the most hard hitting letter that you read and what did it say?

Answer: It was a letter sent to me from Makkah by an adorable 6-yr old girl named Hannah who wrote to tell me that all of her milk teeth had now fallen out, and to request a "speshel" *du'a* that she memorize the entire *Qur'an* one day!

'... And how often is one letter equal to a thousand

And how often are a thousand letters equal to none...'

Question: How many press-ups can you do now?

Answer: I try to maintain a few hundred, 3-4 times per week.

Question: If you could have someone from Islamic Awakening with you who would it be?

Answer: May Allah protect you all from having to be here.

- End of first interview -

Second interview

August 2010 / Ramadan 1431

Question: What are the top five fictional books you have read, whether in prison or out?

Answer: I don't read much fiction, but two novels that most impacted me in my life are 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' and 'The Catcher in the Rye.'

Question: What are your top five favorite non-fictional books?

Answer: The most important books I've read in here are:

- 'A People's History of the United States' by Howard Zinn
- 'The Great War for Civilization' by Robert Fisk
- 'Confessions of an Economic Hitman' by John Perkins
- 'Three Felonies a Day: How the Feds Target the Innocent' by Harvey Silvergate
- And of course, 'Going Rogue' by Sarah Palin

Question: Given all you've written about prison environment, if you were given the top man job of running the prison (you can probably tell I'm grappling for the correct term for THAT person), what changes would you implement?

Answer: It's not easy to pick one or two aspects to change because the system as a whole is a dismal failure. All you need to do is look at the statistics. For example, while America has the highest rate of imprisoning its people out of any other nation on the planet (2.4 million Americans are currently in jail, which is almost 1% of the total population), it also has the highest rate of prisoners returning to prison within just two years of release (60%). Clearly, the American prison system perpetuates crime rather than deters it, and this comes as no surprise if you are aware of two facts:

First, the prisons themselves are not designed to rehabilitate anyone to prepare them for an eventual return to the very society where they committed their crime. They do the exact opposite: they remove a person's sense of humanity and dignity. They are designed to demolish rather than build. The implication of many practices in American prisons is that inmates are some sort of cross-breed between human and animal rather than actual human beings. I'll give you just one example that I experience on a daily basis. Our cell doors are fully controlled by some guy sitting in a distant room behind a two-way mirror who I never see once. At the press of a button, my door slowly slides open with a low electronic and mechanical buzz. I walk out, do my thing, and once more my hour is up. I'm told to step in again, and the door once again electronically and mechanically slides shut. Does this not remind you of how cattle are handled on a farm? Or goats, or sheep? And I've only been here for nearly a year. Imagine the subtle psychological effect this and other practices would have on someone who's been here for years at a time! Also, the constant use of metal shackles - often unnecessarily - even when we meet with our lawyers, we remain handcuffed and shackled. These are just examples, but this is the nature of the American prison: to reduce its inmates' dignity. This is why the majority of them go right back to crime upon their release, and why they in fact behave worse than animals in here.

The second factor to keep in mind is how much money is involved in this system. This is a business. In America, each prisoner equals profit. As a federal inmate, the United States government pays this jail over \$50,000 a year just to keep me here. Imagine, just for me - one person - \$50,000 tax dollars are paid to the Plymouth Correctional Facility each year. This is not even taking into account the money the prison makes off of my canteen order, my phone use, and so on. It's all about profit, and when it's all about profit, there is an incentive to keep business rolling in rather than deter it. Therefore, we point back to the first point I mentioned above about a lack of rehabilitative atmosphere: why keep the money from flowing in?

If I had to choose one practice here to do away with, it would be the lockdown units. I've sat with myself night and day trying to think of a single merit in keeping anyone locked inside a small cell for 23 hours at a time. In fact, if you study the history of lockdown units in general in the US, you'll find that the point was never anything but mind control and behavior modification. There's an important book called *'The Mind Manipulators'* which describes how back in the 1960s, the head of the US Federal Bureau of Prisons (a James Bennet) consulted a group of psychologists as to how to best implement a mind control program in the American prison system, specifically aimed at political prisoners. He was most impressed by a presentation of Dr. Edward Schein, who proposed a 24-point regimen that focused on isolation for extended periods of time throughout the day and sensory deprivation, and over the following years, various prisons across the country - starting with the federal penitentiary in Marion, IL - were used to experiment with these suggestions. When they were found to be successful and effective, they were officially incorporated into what we now call lockdown units, or isolation units, or administrative segregation, etc. that are found in maximum security prisons across America. Just to put this in context, the European High Court for Human Rights recently halted the extradition of our brother Babar Ahmad, et al from the UK to the US on grounds that the conditions in these units could be argued to violate basic human rights and humane treatment. Imagine, this is in the so-called 'Land of the Free,' and another Western authority concurs to its barbarity. When the Prophet (صلي الله عليه و سلم) imprisoned Thumamah bin 'Uthal after he had killed some of the Companions, he was treated so well as a prisoner that he became Muslim due to the kindness he'd experienced from the Prophet.

May Allah free our countless brothers and sisters who currently languish in these American dungeons.

Question: And would Asal be your right-hand cat conveniently placed on an oak table and petted when an ingenious plan (for the forces of good) are devised (sort of like rivaling MAD cat from Inspector Gadget maybe).

Answer: As for 'Asal, she would probably give everyone life sentences in 24-hour lockdown. She's had a terrible grudge against humanity ever since we put out that video of her chasing the laser beam.

Question: What is the FIRST thing you plan to do when you walk out of those prison gates insha'Allaah?

Answer: There are these donuts, Krispy Kremes. They're the most perfect donuts I've ever had: golden brown and slightly crispy on the outside, warm and chewy on the inside; not too large not too small ...

Just to give you an idea of how good they are, a heroin addict in here told me how he once craved some heroin. He went out to get some, but stopped to consider stopping by Krispy Kreme instead. He ended up going for the drugs, but the point is that he even stopped to think about it.

In general, you notice that the main thing people look forward to in here when being released is eating real food.

Question: How do you remain so positive?

Answer: By realizing fully that no matter what happens to me or where I happen to be, there is profound benefit in the situation waiting to be uncovered. We all read the verse in surat an-Nisa': **{ " ... and it might be that you dislike something while Allah places much good in it ... }** and the *hadith*: 'All of the affairs of the believer are good for him.' I take these literally with anything that comes my way. For example, the US government intended to break me by keeping me here. But over time, I've managed to turn the tables by taking advantage of these unique conditions to make myself spiritually, mentally, and physically stronger than I ever was prior to October 21, 2009. That could only have happened in here.

So, if you truly and deeply believe this - that no matter what situation you find yourself in, Allah has placed therein some way to use it to your advantage - then how can you not be positive.

I remember a scene I saw as a kid from the first Superman movie that's never left my mind since. Lois Lane had driven off a cliff or something and died before Superman could save her. Obviously distraught that he didn't possess the power to bring life to the dead, Superman came up with another plan. He decided to fly around the axis of Earth against the direction of its rotation; he figured that if he flew fast enough and enough times, he would be able to reverse the rotation of the Earth and thereby turn back time just to before Lois's car flew off the cliff. It worked, and he saved her from doom.

But the sheer absurdity of it all impressed in my mind that this isn't how it works in real life. So, my advice is to take each and every second of your day and tell yourself that once that second passes, there is no way whatsoever to bring it back. Once that second or minute or hour or day is gone, it's gone forever. You only get one chance to make use of that time. If you adopt this attitude, you will find yourself doing much better things with your time, and wasting less of it.

Question: Have you received any letters/correspondence from the people in your community?

Answer: Yes, may Allah bless and protect them.

Question: You receive a number of letters from people all around the world. I want to know, what are the main things you like reading about in people's letters to you?

Answer: I enjoy reading anything sent to me, but it's especially nice to be updated as to how other Muslim prisoners are doing. This reminds me to remind you to pray as you have never prayed before for our sister Aafia, who I believe has a sentencing date coming soon. This is

her right upon each of us, and is the least we could do in light of what this woman has experienced at the hands of the American government. May Allah free her and relieve her of this chaos.

Question: Congratulations on receiving halal food. Since you've been deprived of certain foods during your first months of incarceration, tell us about your first meal and how you felt eating it.

Answer: The way it's set up here is that we have the common trays that the majority of inmates receive, and then there are various diet trays for those with special needs. So, there is a low-carb tray for diabetics, high-calorie for AIDS patients, vegetarian trays for Hindus & Rastafarians, kosher trays for Jews, etc., and halal trays for Muslims.

These diet trays differ mainly when it comes to the main portion, since side portions usually consist of simple things like green beans, lettuce, and the like. My first halal tray was basically a salami sandwich with beans and corn chips, while the common tray is the same except that bologna is in place of the halal salami. Although this may seem like a simple difference, it's nice to have something in here that's 'Islamic,' even if it's a piece of deli meat.

Another benefit of diet trays in general is that they are much tidier than the common trays. See, the commons are prepared in assembly-line style process that favors speed over quality (there are nearly 2,000 trays to prepare for each meal time). Therefore, I'd often find mouth watering arrangements such as lettuce swimming in the "gravy," or mayonnaise-covered cookies. Once I started getting the halal, though, it was much neater, since all diet trays are prepared separately and there are less of them to put out.

Also, Commons come in open plastic cafeteria trays that resemble what you saw in grade school. Diets, on the other hand, come in those white styrofoam containers that make them look like Chinese take out. It's funny ... the day I started getting halal, a guy a few cells down from me caught a glimpse of the styrofoam and saw a mirage. He took one look, asked what it was, a guard told him it was for Muslim diets, and his heart was apparently immersed in the light of *Tawhid* because he immediately exclaimed that he was also a 'Muslim' (I guess the urge to accept Islam overtook him at just the right moment). So, he eventually convinced the appropriate authorities, and was soon receiving halal trays of his own. Things were going great, he was eating slightly better food, etc. until his world shook on August 11th (aka the 1st of Ramadan). On that day, lunch time came around, and he received ... nothing. Thinking it to be a simple mistake, he waited until dinnertime, when he also received ... nothing! Little did our '*muwahhid*' friend realize upon signing up that anyone on the Muslim diet automatically gets nothing during the day in Ramadan! When this was eventually explained to him and it was asked of him how he could not know of Ramadan if he was a Muslim, he stuttered and requested a return to commons.

I suspect, however, that once Ramadan is over, the light of *Tawhid* will once again bathe his heart.

Question: As Salaam 'Alaykum akhi al-habib... Who's your favourite reciter?

Answer: *Wa 'alayk as-Salam wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuh.*

My favorite in general is al-Minshawi (*tartil*), although shortly before my arrest, I was listening a lot to 'Abd al-Hadi Kanakri. Check out his recitation of Surat al-Kahf. I should add that Surat Al-'Imran by Ahmad al-'Ajamy is one of my favorite recitations of all time. It is the only studio recording of a full *surah* on his album of *Tarawih* recitation, and is quite beautiful.

Question: Firstly *jazaak Allaahu khairan* for your responses, In your previous answers you mentioned the importance of *hijrah*, if you had to recommend a Muslim country to migrate to, what would it be and why?

Answer: If you're considering migrating to a Muslim country, then the Prophet (ﷺ) mentioned that at the end of times, the best places to live are Makkah, Madinah, and ash-Sham.

The best lands generally are those that are governed most according to the *Shari'ah*. Even if one says that no such land is fully/ ideally established today, we can say that some countries are closer than others in this regard, as well as when it comes to the religiosity of the society itself. A country such as Saudi Arabia, for instance, despite its many flaws, clearly has a societal makeup more influenced by Islam and more rooted in its values and traditions than the Western societies (to use a basic comparison). Likewise, other Muslim countries may be closer to the ideal in some respects and farther in others. So, you should look at the overall picture and see which location is closest to the ideal when you iron out all the details and take everything into account. But you should know that in terms of the Prophet's own recommendation (ﷺ), he mentioned that the best places to live near the end of times are Makkah, Madinah, and ash-Sham.

Needless to say, you would make a choice also based on where you are able to plan a sustainable life (i.e. have some work). I personally know brothers and sisters who moved from America to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Oman, Malaysia, the UAE, and elsewhere, have settled with their families, are working, and living comfortably to this day, and are enjoying the religious benefits of doing so. This is because they had a very specific intention and set of priorities in doing so, and Allah provided for them in ways they didn't imagine. And their children are likewise raised in atmospheres that strengthen their love for the *Din* and adherence to it. They don't for example, have to sneak out of school to celebrate 'Id or pray *Jumu'ah*, and they aren't the only ones at their schools or workplace fasting during Ramadan or getting up to make *wudu'* and pray. No doubt, children (as well as adults) are influenced by their environment.

I have a Saudi friend who decided to bring his family to America a few years back. After a while, he complained to me that his youngest son began to doubt the very existence of God. He would come home from school and express these doubts after discussions he would have with friends. Eventually, the brother returned with his family to Saudi Arabia, and the son's doubts vanished. Why? Because he was initially in a society centered around the belief in God, and moved to a society that has pushed God out of nearly every sphere of life. Once that move was reversed, so were its effects.

Our minds are influenced by our environment even as adults. Our minds, our mindset, our *wala'* to the *ummah* and its struggles are directly affected by our environment. I will give another example. Back in 2003, when the United States of America attacked and invaded the Muslim land of Iraq, everyone reacted in their own way. *Shaykh* Tantawi, then the head of al-

Azhar University in Egypt, issued a *fatwa* describing the invasion accurately as "a new crusade targeting our land, our honor, our beliefs, and our *ummah*." (see the March 22nd 2003 issue of 'al-Ahram' newspaper) This is the most subservient government scholar to the most pro-US regime in the Arab world - by no means a fiery radical - yet, he still found it natural to utter these words of truth to his audience in Egyptian society. Now, ask yourself: can you recall a single *da'i* currently living free in America who dared to describe his host country's attack on his brothers in such a manner?

In fact, the *du'at* in America (and West in general) by and large have limited themselves to vague, lukewarm words to characterize the slaughter of over 100,000 of their Iraqi brothers and sisters in their public statements. One popular *da'i* - educated in Madinah, but now living in America - even had no qualms about proudly seeking knowledge at the hand of the #2 biggest contributor and participant in the war, Tony Blair. When the opportunity arose to confront Blair for his crimes, I don't recall anything beyond a few meek and amicable reference to the war being "unnecessary," as if the point of contention is how 'necessary' it was rather than it being an attack on our brethren and lands. So, notice the difference ...

And there is a worse example. Another popular American *da'i* even sat in the audience clapping as Bush announced his self-described "crusade" against the Muslim world in 2001. Imagine! And he didn't stop there. He was also kind enough to provide suggestions for the title of the war (Operation such & such). So, once again notice the contrast between someone like Tantawi - himself a government subordinate (but living in a Muslim society) with the Uncle Toms here when came to the reaction to events that affected the entire *Ummah*. You cannot deny that one's geographic location and environment has a direct effect on mentality. While the West colonized our lands back home, it has colonized our minds right here, and this is infinitely more lethal to our practice of the *Din*.

These are just some thoughts on a matter of great importance, and I want to conclude this by reminding of the *hadith* of the man who murdered a hundred people and then sought a way to repent. When he finally reached a scholar who would give him advice, the scholar told him just one thing and one thing only: 'Go to this land, because it has people in it who worship Allah. So go worship Allah with them ...'

Question: When you go out for your 1hr recreational time, do you see other prisoners or are you alone in that too?

Answer: There are four levels of classification down here in lockdown:

- * JR/ JH (Rec with others/ in a cell with others)
- * JR/ HA (Rec with others/ in a cell alone)
- * RA/ HA (Rec alone/ solitary confinement)
- * FR/ RA/ HA (Rec alone fully shackled/ solitary confinement)

When I first got here, I spent some time as an FR/ RA/ HA, but have now been moved up to RA/ HA. So, yes, during my rec hour, I'm alone as well. No problems, though.

Question: Are you able to keep up to date with current affairs?

Answer: Yes.

The main focus here is obviously the economy. In America, employment is down and wages are low, but exports are up. This is because while the American middle class is squeezed and people here aren't spending, the economies of the so-called emerging markets (i.e. former "poor" nations like China, Brazil, India) are flourishing. So, they are lapping up American products, enjoying sound growth while the country from which they are purchasing suffers. Kind of a reversal of roles, you could say.

Also, Afghanistan is obviously in the headlines these days. First, it is noteworthy that America's war against the Taliban is now the longest war in its entire history - longer than WW I, WW II, Vietnam, etc. That is quite symbolic. Second, think back to the whole McChrystal/Rolling Stone fiasco. It was quite clear at least to me that he intentionally made those comments to Rolling Stone, knowing full well that they would lead to his ouster. He knew the ship was sinking, and he understandably didn't want to be the one in charge when it went finally went under. I mean, come on: Karzai himself threatened to join the Taliban?! How much more of an embarrassment can this become?

And of course, there was nothing more hypocritical than reading that the Pentagon accused Julian Assange of Wiki leaks of having "the blood of innocent Afghans on his hands." In general, Afghanistan is, for America a case of "we've invested too much to stop." That's the only reason that a single American soldier is still over there. They have no idea what they are fighting to achieve, their losses are exponentially increasing, they know they will eventually lose, its draining the economy in the same way it drained the Soviet Union's prior to its total collapse - so why else would they insist on remaining? Sad.

Another hot topic is the so-called 'Ground Zero Mosque.' One thing to take note of is how the media has clung to one particular statement the center's founder/ imam once made in an interview that criticized America's policies toward Muslims as a reason it was attacked. The reaction to this statement - he was branded as a 'radical' because of it by the right - and its evoked criticism revealed a characteristic trait of many Americans which is that they are so infatuated with themselves and this country that they are startled and shocked when they discover that there are actually people who might think otherwise. Malcom X described the same trait he noticed in white racists of his time, saying that the white racist "loves himself so much that he is startled if he discovers that his victims don't share his vainglorious self-opinion." (p.243) They cannot fathom how anyone can oppose something American, even be it American oppression. When I read the news sometimes, I honestly think to myself that it's almost as if they're saying to Muslims: 'Where's the problem? Why are you so upset? Those are AMERICAN soldiers in your countries! Those are AMERICAN drone missiles blowing apart your women and children! You should feel honored!' So, for the imam of this center to even suggest that perhaps Muslims don't like being killed by American weapons is now considered 'radical.' So, at the end of the day, the joke is on the so-called 'moderate' Muslims - you can condemn terrorism and distance yourself from the concept of *Jihad* six ways till Sunday, but this will never be enough to make you 'moderate.' It's just going to be a downward spiral of compromise until even the 'Islam' will be removed from the term 'moderate Islam.' Have some dignity, people!

And now, I'm reading that a Muslim cab driver in New York had his throat slashed by a customer who asked if he is Muslim ... *ahlan was sahan*.

Question: How do you keep your heart from going hard?

Answer: By avoiding excess. Ibn al-Qayyim pointed out that the root cause of the heart becoming hard is excess, specifically in the areas of food, sleep, talking, and socialization. And of course, the Prophet himself said: 'Beware of excessive laughter, for it kills the heart.'

So, due to the nature of my conditions, I can easily avoid excess: the food supply is controlled; I'm not one to sleep more than 4-5 hours a night anyway; I'm in solitary confinement, so talking and socialization aren't exactly available temptations.

Second, I maintain a strict daily schedule of *dhikr*, *du'a'*, and *Qur'an* reading. I never skip this portion of my day for anything. I took two popular, easily available books - 'Fortress of the Muslim' and '*Riyad as-Salihin*' - and compiled for myself a list of *adhkar* and *ad'iyah* that I complete daily. I recite these forms of remembrance and supplication while internalizing their meanings, each word of them, rather than robotically repeat words I don't understand. I've also increased in prison in making *tawassul* to Allah through His Names and Attributes - ie. asking Him by His Honor, Mercy, Power, that He is the One, the Self-Sustaining, etc. Repeating these Names & Attributes tightens the *Tawhid* in your heart and humbles it since you are making mention of One who is above you. (In fact, now that I recall, one of the very first things I ever did in here was to make a list of Allah's 99 Names)

Third, and I cannot stress this enough, is night prayer (*Qiyam*). Anyone who prays regularly at night can attest to the cleanliness that he/she feels that day knowing that the night was spent so close to Allah while everyone else was fast asleep.

One thing you can do on the outside if you don't have much time for this is to set aside simply 15 minutes of each day, pick a quiet and tranquil part of your home, and spend that time engaged in one particular type of worship. Recite the *Qur'an* for that time, or make some *dhikr* or *du'a'*, or pray some *nawafil*, or just sit and silently reflect on the immense beauty of the Creation and Power of the Creator. Set aside this time and never skip it.

Question: What type of exercise do you do to stay in shape (other than push-ups)?

Answer: We don't have access to a gym or exercise equipment, so it's a rotation between push ups, sit ups, crunches, leg presses, and lots of running!

Question: Have you noticed any improvements in your fitness level compared to when you were on the outside?

Answer: Yes, الحمد لله. I've never felt better.

Question: Have you seen Nelson (the Whitney Houston fan) recently and if so, how is he doing?

Answer: Nelson has been back and forth between various units in recent months. The last I heard is that he was caught trying to attack someone, so he's in quite a bit of trouble, it seems.

But he has quite the replacement, one you will not believe me about. A few weeks ago, a straight up neo-Nazi skinhead - swastika tattoo and all - moved in. Every night, I hear high

notes coming from his direction, but I would disregard it; not thinking that it was him. But after a while, it was confirmed. It was him, doing falsetto. That's the way this place is: they try to act all hardcore during the daylight hours when they're visible, but once night hits, the real 'them' comes out. A neo-Nazi doing falsetto ...

Question: What has been your weirdest experience in prison?

Answer: The weirdest experience I had with another inmate was about five months ago. I was in bed reading, and all of a sudden someone slips a sheet of note paper under my door. I walk over and pick it up, and scribbled across one side is 'Do you want to escape?' I looked and there was nobody on the other side of my door. So I tossed it. About a week later, who I presume to be the same person once again slid a note under my door with the same question. This time, he remained standing there, and verbally added: 'I've got the guard's cuff keys.' I looked slowly to the left, where the intercom in my cell could record anything I said. I had never met this guy. I know exactly what he was trying to do. I turned back to him and said audibly: 'That's amazing. I'm not interested.' A few weeks later, this guy vanished ... but not by escaping. Rather, he was released early. See, he had walked over to another inmate, slid something under his door, and struck up a conversation about what this second person was in for. It was a murder case. So, this guy agreed to testify in court against the murder suspect in exchange for being released almost three years early.

But my weirdest experience in general was about two months ago. The Muslim Chaplain - a very good brother - had stopped by the unit to visit me for a few minutes. As we were speaking, we realized it was *maghrib* time. So, we naturally stood up to pray. About 30 seconds into it, I asked myself why it felt so odd to be praying right at that moment. It was then that I realized that since coming to prison over seven months prior, this was the very first time I was praying in *jama'ah* with another Muslim as opposed to alone in my cell. It felt like an old friend had returned after a long absence, despite the fact that I had to pray in shackles (my arms and feet have to be shackled up when I meet with anyone).

It wasn't like praying in the *masjid*, but it was somewhat of a milestone in here nonetheless.

Question: As Ramadan is approaching, can you give us a specific advice?

Answer: Look at fasting, and Ramadan in general, as a stepping stone. We often look at fasting simply as an act of abstinence. But in reality it is meant to build you and bring out aspects of your personality that you never knew you had. When the Prophet (صلي الله عليه و سلم) was describing the fast of Prophet Dawud (King David), he said: 'He would fast every other day, and he would never back down from a confrontation.' On the face of it, there seems to be no connection between Dawud's fasting and the fact that he never backed down from a confrontation. But think about: the Prophet here was trying to illustrate that Dawud's fasting brought out this quality of bravery in him. How? Because when a person is able to go an entire day without succumbing to the desires of the body and survive to do it another day, he or she realizes that anything is possible. The British lost key battles of the American Revolutionary War because they ran out of food. But we are able to go an entire month fasting each day while going about our lives. That is strength within us that fasting brings out to teach us more about ourselves and what we are capable of.

Also, let fasting/ Ramadan's spiritual atmosphere transform your worship habits for the rest of the year. In this month, you feel such a drive to do some or all of the following:

- recite plenty of *Qur'an* each day
- pay charity to the poor
- pray *Tarawih/ Qiyam* at night
- stay for *i'tikaf* at the *masjid*

So, you boost your share of probably all of these to some extent for the duration of the month. The point that many of us end up missing, though, that there should be a transformation that occurs whereas you pick one of these acts and incorporate it into your life. So, make yourself known to Allah as the one who reads a *juz'* a day as a habit, or that you fast three days each month as an inseparable part of your life, or that you never fail to wake up and pray maybe four *raka'at* before *Fajr* time enters. The point is that Ramadan makes a permanent change in you, rather than have it just come and go like any other month.

Question: Do you have a specific Ramadan program for yourself/ how would you spend your days this Ramadan?

Answer:

- ~ 2:00 am: I wake up and drink some coffee
Review some *Qur'an* for about 15 minutes
Pray *Qiyam* with what i reviewed
- ~ 4:00 am: Have *suhur* (my breakfast brought to me early)
After *suhur*, I try to make some *du'a'* for myself and for others who have requested it be made for them; I do this until the *Fajr* time
- ~ 5:00 am: I pray *Fajr*
Go through wird of *dhikr* until *Duha*
- ~ 6:00 am: Straight *Qur'an* reading throughout the day, with intermittent nap @ noon time
Rec time during the day takes away an hour of time from *Qur'an*
- ~ 7:30 pm: *Iftar* (my missed meals from earlier in the day), *Maghrib*
- ~ 8:00 pm: Read the news until '*Isha'*
- ~ 9:00 pm: Pray '*Isha'*, sleep

One thing about Ramadan in here, it really makes you think... When your tongue is imprisoned from tasting food/drink, you feel that you can drink an ocean or eat a buffet. But once you are free to eat and drink, you find that a few bites of food and sips of water make you full. Your hunger and thirst was an illusion meant to show you, when you finally saw the food and drink, how you only needed a tiny portion of what you were deprived of all day. And this deprivation made you stronger at the end of the month, and this deprivation brought you closer to your Lord, and '*Id al-Fitr*' is a celebration of your release from the prison of fasting in one

piece.

So, I look at a physical prison in the same way. In prison we learn what few portions of the outside life really matter now that we've been separated from it. It has made us stronger, closer to our Lord, and all that our imprisoned brothers and sisters await is that *'Id*. And just as we are sure that *'Id* comes after the prison of fasting Ramadan, there is no doubt in the *'Id* that follows the time spent in these physical prisons.

Question: Could you share with us how you would want an experience in *Jannah* to be? I.e. what would you want to do there when you first walk in (*insha' Allah*), who would you want to meet up with in order of preference? What would you like to eat there? etc.

Answer: For me, the experience of *Jannah* is defined by one particular *hadith* in 'Sahih al-Bukhari' and Muslim, and this is the *hadith* where Allah will ask the believers in Paradise: 'Are you pleased?' They will reply: 'And how can we not be pleased, our Lord, while You have given us more than you've given anyone else?' So, He will say: 'Should I not give you what is even better than all of this?' They will ask: 'And what can possibly be better than this?' He will reply: 'I grant you My Pleasure, and I will never be displeased with you.'

As Muslims, we live each waking second of our observant lives in pursuit of that one prize: the Pleasure of our Lord. It's why we get up from a comfortable sleep in a warm bed on a cold morning, walk over to the sink, and splash water on our bodies to pray. It's what motivates us to withstand sixteen hours of hunger and thirst on a hot summer's day in Ramadan without complaint. It's what kept Moses patient with the unimaginable frustration of trying to guide the Children of Israel, and Jesus patient when they tried to kill him, and Abraham patient when his own people lit a blazing fire and tossed him into it, and Muhammad patient when his own tribesman would wrap their heads around his neck and try to strangle him out of hatred of monotheism - peace be upon them all. It was this prize that al-Imam al-Bukhari was after when he dedicated nearly two decades of his life to travelling the world to compile a single book that would introduce humanity to the authentic *Sunnah* of the Prophet (صلي الله عليه وسلم), and it was this prize that kept al-Imam Ahmad strong under the whip, and it was this prize that drove Sayyid Qutb to choose the hangman's noose over compromise. Every bit of this *dunya* that we gladly give up, we do so for this one goal: the Pleasure of Allah.

So, I imagine the looks on the faces of those believers (may Allah make us from them) standing there at that moment, as they are awaiting the answer to the question: 'And what can possibly be better than this?' They are so overwhelmed by the pleasure and joy of being in Paradise - of having simply made it - that they cannot imagine there actually being something MORE REWARDING than the bounties they have thus far been enjoying. So, they stand there anxiously awaiting the reply from their Lord - everyone who lived a life of worship, everyone who lived a lifetime of gaining *Shar'i* knowledge, everyone who lived a life of charity for the poor, everyone who lived a life of *jihad*, everyone who experienced prison for their religion, everyone who ever gave anything seeking that one prize - they stand there awaiting a reply, and then when it comes ('I grant you My Pleasure'), they are finally reminded of what it is they lived these lives pursuing. They will all recall reading this very *hadith* during their lives and being motivated by it. Al-Bukhari will certainly remember it when he hears this reply because it is he who collected it in his 'Sahih' and introduced us to it.

And it is at this moment that we will experience the indescribable feeling that accompanies the confirmation from Allah Himself that this goal that we have spent our entire lives pursuing - while not knowing whether or not we had attained - has now been granted to us for literal eternity. This is a feeling, a concept, that none who are reading these words but a believer can understand and appreciate.

Question: You've been regularly writing the 'Qur'an and You' series which are a great read. How do you choose which verses to write and expound on?

Answer: I got the idea for this one day when I heard one guy in here struggling to read the Bible. He complained that it was more of a historical narrative than it was a book that he could directly apply on a daily basis. So, this triggered a drive in me to go back and look through the *Qur'an* at the particular verses that I've been able to directly incorporate into my life on a regular basis. I would jot down brief notes next to some of these over a period of time, and eventually decided that I might as well flesh out what I wrote for others to possibly benefit from.

So, my initial goal was to highlight how the *Qur'an* is a constant, personal, and very relevant companion to us. It is designed to have a direct effect on our daily lives in so much as we allow it to, and that all starts when you develop a personal love and relationship with it rather than leave it on the shelf and bury the benefits it has for you under the sands of neglect and laziness. Second, the intention is to highlight that while the *Qur'an* is traditionally a source of *Iman* and *Fiqh* teachings, there is an aspect to its verses that is often overlooked. Growing up in this wilderness, many will ask themselves: 'How am I supposed to think? What type of outlook should I adopt? What should my position or attitude be regarding this or that concept?' I believe that what transformed the Prophet's Companions when they came to hear the *Qur'an* was not necessarily the intricate details of '*Aqidah* or *Fiqh*. Rather, it was because the *Qur'an* answered these same questions for them. Therefore, in addition to its recognized role as a source of '*Aqidah* and *Fiqh* the *Qur'an* also is designed by Allah to shape your personality, to shape your attitude, your mindset, your outlook, your worldview. Allah is teaching us how to think.

So, I stop at some of the verses that exemplify these concepts in one way or another.

Question: I wish to know the following as to get some idea and insight of the real pain people/Muslims in your situation are suffering. Could you please give us an account on the affects being in prison has on you emotionally and psychologically? Do you feel being in prison has had a negative impact on you, in these 2 regards? For example, do you feel more sad/worried inside prison then you would outside of prison? You don't have to speak from a personal point of view and *inshallah* being in prison hasn't affected you in this way, but as a prisoner and as someone who has in general had contact with prisoners, what affects does being in almost absolute isolation have on one emotionally and psychologically?

Answer: Obviously, being locked up isn't all that fun. Some don't take it very well, especially when they find that not only are they in jail, but they're in this particular part of it. The worst cases are when he simply cannot bear the reality and try to take matters into their own hands by ending their own lives. This is more common with those who have committed the most brutal crimes against others. Imagine that you've done something so horrible, and are left in

a cell by yourself for months or years at a time to do nothing but replay what you did in your mind over and over again, seeing the faces of your victims in your nightmares, night after night. Needless to say, there are some whose consciences are torn apart by this after a short time. As someone once said down here: 'Sometimes, the worst company to have is yourself.' Usually, though, they fail to carry through.

So, these are the worst cases, and are becoming increasingly common. Massachusetts especially has a high inmate suicide rate: four times that of the national average!

But I believe that what determines a prisoner's reaction to his conditions is whether or not he goes in planning to gain a few things from it all. Idleness is the prisoner's worst enemy, and when I look around my own unit, for example, I find that those who are handling it worst are those who do very little during the day besides sleep, eat, complain, and get into verbal fights. Those who appear to be taking things in stride, however, are those who you usually find with a book in hand at least each day, exercise, and otherwise display some attempt to improve themselves while here. Just as you have the bad extreme, you also have some examples such as this, and you then have people ranging in between according to their own efforts. It's really about giving a purpose to one's stay here.

As for me, I set specific goals for myself very early on, and knew immediately after being brought here exactly what I would work to gain during my stay. I made goals for my spiritual state, my mental state, and my physical state, and each day I occupy myself with fulfilling and maintaining those goals. I made a list of every possible useful activity I could engage in while sitting in a cell. *Dhikr*, recitation of the *Qur'an*, memorization of the *Qur'an*, reading *Hadith*, reading a book, reading the news, writing a letter, working out, making *du'a'*, cleaning my cell, and so forth - I made the list and hung it on the wall with a piece of scotch tape I found lying around somewhere, and I look at each day when I wake up. Initially, I divided my day based on the prayer times, and would basically engage in one activity on the list until the next prayer time, after which I'd move on down the list to another one. But I was getting very little done this way with such low frequency of change. So, I decided to time myself using the security rounds that the guards must finish every half hour. After I pray *Fajr*, I begin at the top of the list and do nothing but that activity until the guard walks past my door on his next round. I then drop whatever I'm in the middle of and move on to the next one for the next 30 minutes until I once again hear that guards footsteps, and I continue like this until I go to sleep at night. So, you asked if I felt more sad/worried in here. My answer is that, as strange as I know it sounds, I'm too busy during my days in here to feel sad or worried. With the exception of the first few days when I was still adjusting, I can't say that I've ever had a 'bad' day in here, and this is from the blessings of Allah, alone.

Question: Could you give folks like me some advice on how to treat my mum the way she deserves? What should I do and what shouldn't I do? And what do I do when whatever I do, it seems to upset her? I do something, she gets upset so I don't do that thing and she still gets upset. What do I do?

Answer: First of all, even the best parents who walked this Earth at one time or another were unreasonably harsh towards their children. I'll give you an example. Abu Bakr had once hosted a large dinner gathering at his home, and placed his son 'Abd ar-Rahman in charge of feeding the guests while Abu Bakr tended to some errand. 'Abd ar-Rahman brought out the food, but the guests refused to touch it until Abu Bakr returned. When Abu Bakr finally ar-

rived to find the food uneaten, he became angry with his son, walked over to him, poked him in the chest, and called him a '*ghunthar*', which from Arabic roughly translates as idiot. This was even though 'Abd ar-Rahman had done what his father had asked, but it was the guests who had refused to eat.

So, your situation was also that of the children of the Companions themselves. What I would do in your shoes is to sit down with your mother and have a clear and straightforward discussion with her in which you express exactly how you feel. Explain to her that you love her, want to please her, and are trying your best to do so, but you can't seem to do so. What exactly do you need me to change to make you happy, mom? You need to be on the same page as her in terms of what will satisfy her, otherwise, you'll keep running in circles. And she needs to be on the same page as you in terms of how you feel inside, otherwise, this will never end and she will never change her approach in dealing with you. But the most important step, based on the little you have told me, is to be honest and clear with each other as to how you feel and why she is upset.

If this brings about a good result, excellent. If it doesn't at first, and your mother continues dealing with you in the same way, your job is to continue doing what you know would make her happy (I'm sure she is appreciative of you at least part of the time) because at the very least, she gave birth to you, right? If she did nothing but give birth to you, this would be enough of a motivation to disregard whatever she might put you through and put yourself at her service. I'm sure you read how a man took his mother for Hajj once, and she was so old that he had to perform the *tawaf* carrying her on his back. He would have to clean her when she helplessly relieved herself while on his back. Imagine! So, he went and asked 'Umar if by going through all of this trouble to please his mother, he had repaid her for all that she had done for him in his life. So, 'Umar looked at him and responded: 'You have not repaid her for even a single contraction she experienced while giving birth to you.'

And never forget to turn to Allah and ask Him to change your mother's heart toward you.

Question: Has your experience changed your view of what a friend is?

Answer: Whenever a tribulation befalls an individual, a community, or a nation, I think it's natural that there end up being those you lose respect for as well as those you gain much respect for. And that has certainly occurred in my case.

Question: Which part/s of the *Seerah* do you find most interesting, and why?

Answer: An interesting part in the *Sirah* is when the group of early Muslims fled persecution in Makkah by migrating to Ethiopia to live under the protection of an-Najashi, a Christian king. The *kuffar* sent 'Amr bin al-'As and 'Abdullah bin Abi Rabi'ah to do whatever it took to bring those Muslims back to Makkah. So, they made the trip to Ethiopia bearing expensive gifts for an-Najashi and his clergy, and tried their best to drive a wedge between him and his new guests living under his protection. At first, they vaguely told the king that these Muslims had abandoned the religion of their forefathers (i.e. idol worship), had divided the Makkan society, and therefore were not worthy of asylum and should be handed over to the *kuffar* of Makkah. Ja'far bin Abi Talib stood up and explained to an-Najashi exactly what Islam was all about—that they had merely been taught to worship their Creator without any partner—and he ended his speech by reciting versus from the *Qur'an* about the Virgin Ma-

ryam. This prompted the Christian king to begin weeping, and he told the *kuffar* from Makkah that they would not have these Muslims back.

Frustrated at their failure to turn the religious Christian king against the Muslims, ‘Amr and ‘Abdullah decided to try a dirty trick: to bring Jesus into the picture, thinking of how much the king would be offended at the fact that the Muslims do not worship Jesus. So, they went to him the next day and tried to fire an-Najashi up against the Muslims by telling him that they blasphemed Jesus Christ. Now, just stop for a second and think about the situation:

- The fate of the Muslims is in an-Najashi’s hands (after Allah).
- If the Muslims offend him and he hands them back to the Makkans to be extradited, they will face certain arrest and torture at the hands of the *kuffar*.
- The king clearly loves Jesus, and is an observant Christian.
- The king’s opinion of Muslims depends entirely on what Ja’far bin Abi Talib will now respond with in the face of the accusations regarding blaspheming Jesus: he can either tell the king what he wants to hear, thereby allowing the Muslims to continue living in comfort and ease as immigrants to this foreign land, OR he could tell the king the truth and risk being extradited and losing all of the comfort they had enjoyed thus far.

So, this was quite a tense moment for Ja’far and the group of Muslims he was speaking on behalf of. What would he say to the king? How much trust did he have in Allah to protect him if he were to tell the king a truth that he possibly didn’t want to hear about Jesus? How much trust did he have in Allah to tell the king something that would possibly turn his opinion against Muslims and cause them to lose their favor with an-Najashi?

So, Ja’far decided that he would trust in Allah and tell the king the truth. He stood up and responded that Muslims believe in and love Jesus as a Messenger, a Prophet, the Spirit, and Word of Allah born miraculously, but that he is not more than this, and is not to be worshipped as if he is God. Of course, the Makkan *kuffar* stood in anticipation of the king’s anger at this supposed belittlement of Jesus and the subsequent handing over of the Muslims to them. But instead, to their great dismay and surprise, the king nodded his head in agreement, and replied that he believed exactly what he had just heard from Ja’far. He then handed the gifts brought by ‘Amr and ‘Abdullah back to them, sent them back to Makkah in humiliation, and in fact became a Muslim himself. He was such a dedicated Muslim that when he died a few years later, and the Prophet (pbuh) was informed about it all the way in Madinah, he said to his Companions: ‘A righteous man from Ethiopia has died on this day. So, let us get up and pray for him!’ And in another narration, he said: ‘Ask Allah’s forgiveness for your brother!’

I chose this particular incident from the *Sirah* because I often ask myself how we today would have handled the situation had we been in Ja’far’s position. No doubt, some of us would have also trusted in Allah and done no differently. But there would also be some of us who would’ve thought first and foremost about the comfortable life that would’ve been thrown away had the king been offended by the truth. No doubt, some of us would’ve tried to find some midpoint, vague, compromising response that would neither be explicitly true nor explicitly false. Some of us would have let the tense nature of the moment pressure us while standing in front of an-Najashi, whose continued protection we so desperately sought.

Now, Ja'far could easily have succumbed to such pressure. After all, he had the lives of dozens of others on his shoulders. Had he done so, they would probably have been allowed to stay there (for just the amount of time it would take 'Amr and 'Abdullah to go through the *Qur'an* and dig up the verses about Jesus to show the king that they had lied). But despite the risk Ja'far took in speaking the truth about Jesus—or rather, because of it—the outcome was better than these Muslims could've imagined, and was the exact opposite of what the *kuffar* of Makkah had imagined. This is something for us to note, particularly with the pressures we face today.

Also interesting about the *Sirah* is how it constantly rotates between pleasantries and hardship. For example, look at the 6th year of Prophethood: Hamzah joined the Muslims, immediately followed by 'Umar. Then, in the 10th year of Prophethood, Abu Talib died, immediately followed by Khadijah. Then, the following year, the Prophet established contacts in Madi-nah, married 'A'ishah, and then was taken on the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*. And the pattern continues like this, alternating between ease and hardship. It's clear that this pattern was in place in order to accustom the Prophet and the Companions to sudden turns of events, and to make it easier for them to rapid change.

Question: can you summarize your whole court experience please?

Answer: At around 11pm of the night before my court date, after all the hourly recs of the day are completed, the guards buzz my cell and ask me if I'm going to "get ready" for court. "Getting ready" means taking a late-night shower, shaving, and cutting one's hair. I tell the guard that I will only be showering. So, my door slides open with the numbing electronic whirring I hear all day every day from all the doors in the unit opening and closing, and I am escorted by a guard to the shower, where I am locked in (it is sort of an oversized green metal cage adjacent to the wall). Once I'm done, I'm given a fresh jumpsuit and allowed back into my cell for the night.

Down here, we have difficulty sleeping the night before a court date. This is not because it will be a particularly exciting or significant hearing. Rather, a court date is the only change we have to leave not only the prison as a whole, but the very unit itself. So, in a sense, going to court is a milestone in our existence here; an opportunity for some change of scenery after nearly a year of being restricted to an area comprising only a cell and the unit corridor. Therefore, one stays up thinking about this prospect. Nonetheless, I still manage to sleep for a few hours before I am woken up by another buzz from the intercom. See, on a court day, breakfast comes to us separately and early (I estimate around 4AM). I don't remember what I am served for breakfast that morning, but I don't eat it. I just drink the half-pint of 1% milk we get, eat an apple, and slide the greasy pile back out under my cell door. I am then given a large plastic trash bin liner. We are not allowed to leave behind any belongings, despite the fact that we will most likely return. So, I pack up what little I have, am let out again to where a group of guards are waiting to shackle my arms and legs, and my belongings are transferred down to the booking department, where they are stored until my return.

After I'm shackled up, I am led down a long, empty hallway (I estimate it is around 4:30AM now) to the booking department. At booking, I am put into a waiting cell, where I will remain until a van is ready. Thankfully, in this cell, I am able to look out the window in the door and across the booking area to see a clock on the opposite wall. It's 5AM, so I wash up and make *wudu'* for *Fajr*. Afterwards, I sit on the metal bench attached to the back wall (the entire cell

is roughly 7x5 feet) and go through my morning *adhkar*, which take half an hour to complete. As I scan the interior of the cell with my eyes—the maroon door, the pale yellow walls, the gray marbleized concrete floor, the silver sink/toilet—I wonder who on Earth thought up this horrendous color combination, if it is indeed intentional, if so, why. I read each bit of graffiti scrawled on the door and walls, wondering who each author is, where he is now, what he used to scratch his words into the wall, what he was thinking as he did so—as the hours roll by, it is such thoughts that float around in my head to stave off the boredom. It is totally silent at this hour of day.

Finally, two and a half hours after I was brought to this cell, a guard unlocks the door and does a full search of my person. He even removes the soles of my sneakers to check underneath them. This is prison, and such searches are somewhat understandable in light of what some inmates have done in the past. Yet, I think to myself that no self-respecting Muslim should ever grow complacent with this. I'm left alone again, and after 30 more minutes, he returns and shackles me up once again—this time my waist is wrapped with a thick chain that is buckled to my handcuffs—and I'm led into the van. Now, this compartment where I am made to sit is essentially a giant metal box sectioned off into three parts, one vertical and two horizontal. I can't stand without being hunched over, so I estimate no more than four feet high. I cannot fully stretch out my legs, so I estimate around 4–5 feet wide, three feet long. I slide in, and two other prisoners slide in next to me in that small 5x4x3 feet metal box. We are all still fully shackled. One of the two guys appears to weigh at least 300 lbs, and says he is about to vomit because of the suffocation he feels! Come on, man...

The van pulls out of the garage, onto the highway, and off we go. All of the windows in the van are sealed shut and blacked out, so there is neither fresh air nor a clear view of the outside. But I twist my head around and realize that if I squint hard enough, I can see past the metal grate on one side of the box and look out into the windshield. I'm able to hold the view for maybe a minute or so at a time, and when I do, I'm able to see the “outside” world for the first time in over nine months. Simple, mundane sights such as traffic lights, gas stations, the pavement, civilian vehicles, normal people sitting in them, Home Depot, coffee shops—all of this I try to soak in with my eyes for as much of the hour-long ride as possible. One of the guards in the front seat pulls out a cereal bar and stuffs the whole thing in his mouth. I turn back around.

We finally approach the federal courthouse in Boston, which is nicely situated on the waterfront, facing the Atlantic Ocean. I'm able to catch a glimpse of deep blue water before the van slows into the courthouse's garage, right in front of a sign that reads: “US Department of Justice: All Federal Agents Check Weapons Here”. I think back to the graffiti on the walls of the holding cell in Plymouth, and I wonder if any of their authors considered scratching an ‘in’ in front of ‘Justice’, or maybe a smiley face at the bottom of the sign just to lighten the mood. Compared to prison, everything here looks so new.

We're all led out of the van, still in shackled, and into the basement of the courthouse, to the left, around a corner, and in front of a row of large holding cells with gray mesh enclosing. There are four large cells, each holding prisoners from the separate prisons whose inmates have hearings here today: Plymouth is in the first cell, Wyatt is next to us, Dedham, then Suffolk County. Our handcuffs are removed, and we are each put into our respective cells with our leg shackle still on (in case we discover a way to miraculously run through metal wire and concrete walls). I'm in the cell with three other inmates—“Brazil” (nicknames often consist of

one's country of origin), "Spanky" (or not...), and an inmate who gives no name. We all have hearings scheduled for late in the afternoon (mine, at 3PM, being the last), and it is still quite early in the morning. I look around for a clock to see what time it is—nothing! (What is it with prisoners not being allowed to see clocks?). In any case, I ask a nearby guard for the time, and it is only 8AM. So, we have a nice long day of sitting around and waiting...

Two of the others with me are here to be sentenced for federal drug convictions. Actually, they pled guilty for reduced time. They were facing life sentences, but took deals that would give them no more than eleven years. Sitting there and conversing with them all day, you would wonder how they are so indifferent to the fact that they will leave this building at the end of the day with potentially a decade of their lives signed away to federal prison. But what they will tell you—and what they actually told me—is: 'Hey, we did it. It's not a question of innocence or guilt. We had to feed our families somehow, so we're not denying that we actually sold the stuff.' See, that phrase 'we had to feed our families somehow' is a reflection of the chaotic circus of American society. It is no coincidence that both of these men are black. Their skin color is intrinsically linked to the fact that the easiest option available to them—and, possibly, the only option—to provide for their loved ones was by selling drugs...a clear legacy of the "wrong foot" they got off on when their ancestors were brought to this country as slaves; and in a sense, they never ceased being subdued by the cannibalistic system that makes crime so alluring to them in light of their socioeconomic conditions, then punishes them with decades in prison for putting a hand in the cookie jar.

...It's lunch time, and a Marshal throws brown paper bags at us. Suspecting pork, I quickly tear open the bag to check. One look and sniff is all it takes to know I'm on the mark—a ham sandwich! I tell the Marshal 'I'm a Muslim, and I do not eat pig.' He yells back: 'Then take the ham out of the sandwich and eat the lettuce.' I trade my sandwich for someone's Gatorade. One of the main attractions of court dates is that they are a chance to eat REAL FOOD. Brand names! Gatorade, Lay's Potato Chips, etc., as opposed to what is available inside prison. So, today, although I don't score a sandwich, I at least got to taste some normalcy.

...These guys are sleeping on the concrete most of the day, so I also take a corner in the cell and have a short nap, before I wake up and make *wudu'* to pray *Dhuhr* (I estimate it's around 1PM now). It's times like this when I thank Allah for the allowance to wipe over socks instead of washing the feet for *wudu'*—it would've been impossible for me to have my feet reach the water while they are chained together. I literally say '*alhamdulillah*' aloud as I wipe my socks. Now, I must determine the direction of Makkah from this basement with no window. I mentally travel backwards from the moment I entered the cell...back to when I took the right to stand inside...before that, a left...before that, a left from the garage when I got out of the van...the van turned left to enter the garage...the Atlantic Ocean is east, and was on the right. So, here in the belly of this bastion of American "justice," I am now facing Makkah...I stand up to pray, with my feet shackled tight.

Before I know it, it's 3PM, and I'm off...

You asked me to summarize my court experience, and I wish to conclude it by mentioning that it has been nearly a year since I was last arrested, two years since I was first arrested. I have read through countless court documents handed over by the government during the year that I've been sitting here in prison. And to this day—after all this time—I have yet to come across even a single shred of evidence whatsoever that even remotely relates to the

supposed “shopping mall” plot that I was initially accused of (but until now have not even been charged with). Nothing at all—there’s simply no trace of it, as if the accusation itself never existed in the first place. I think that in and of itself summarizes my court experience.

Was-Salaamu’ alaykum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuh

- End of second interview –

Appendix I: Tarek's talent

The following is a poem written by Tarek:

A drone over the skies of Madinah

(The Final Crusade)

Ask yourself: if the Prophet was with us today,
If he spoke the same words and lived the same way,
If he returned with the same message to relay,
How long would the forces of the world let him stay?

Back then, he taught humankind to: 'Bow down to none,
No idol, no tyrant, no oppressive nation,
Keep your heart and mind free from their domination,
True power is with God, so don't fear anyone!'

Quraysh let him be so long as he was benign,
And to his message, they thought that few would incline,
But when he preached openly, would not bend his spine,
The state turned against him, for he had crossed the line;

At first, they rushed to him seeking some compromise,
They'd give him the mic if he just ceased to chastise,
The ills around him they feared he would neutralize,
But he would not clothe his words in any disguise;

And he persisted in making more minds aware,
Of society's false gods of which to beware,
Of the tyrants of Earth, so the state could not bear,
And his "freedom of speech" vanished into thin air;

Choking him as he prayed, they tried suffocation,
Then imposed three years of economic sanction,
Signed off authorizing his assassination,
He was hunted in his land, forced to migration;

To track down this "radical", the vast land they'd comb,
Abu Jahl led the pack, his mouth frothing with foam,
Put him on a 'Wanted' list in his own home,
Like Jesus Christ before him at the hands of Rome;

And the Romes of today at whose hands we're abused,
Who preach to us values from which they're self-excused,
How similar the tools of repression they used,
The tyrants of past and present are ever fused;

Today, he'd see us consumed by the same fires,
With the gods in our hearts these worldly desires,
And the gods of the Earth nations and empires,
Headed by killers and professional liars;

He laid siege to *Qaynuqa'* for one woman's fear,
So what would he say to those who gang-raped 'Abeer?
Muffled 'Aafia's screams as she shed tear after tear?
And occupy Muslim countries year after year?

He'd come back to remind us to: 'Bow down to none,
No idol, no tyrant, no oppressive nation,
Keep your heart and mind free from their domination,
True power is with God, so don't fear anyone!'

In a repeat of that reality uncouth,
Imagine he stood and struggled for the same truth,
And had the same impact on society's youth,
Would they not once again fight this man nail & tooth?

Of course, they'd first test him to see what he's about,
Would he stay true like before, or would he sell out?
Would fear of the state instill in his mind some doubt?
No doubt, he'd be a mountain shaking off their clout;

In an era where his inheritors deprave,
The trust of their knowledge so their skins they would save,
He'd be and inspiration for every field slave,
Craving an example of the fearless and brave;

Their think-tanks would scramble to counter his appeal,
Find scholars for dollars with whom to make a deal,
To persuade us: 'The Prophet is just full of zeal,
Grieving injustices - quote - "perceived" and not real!'

They'd wiretap him as he said: 'Bow down to none,
No idol, no tyrant, no oppressive nation,
Keep your heart and mind free from their domination,
True power is with God, so don't fear anyone!'

Then they'd name him on a federal indictment,
American court would charge him with incitement,
Through *Surat at-Tawbah* - marked 'Criminal Statement'
Khalid bin al-Walid as his co-defendant;

They'd say he conspired from the North to South Pole,
And seek a life sentence with no chance of parole,

In a bright orange suit on lockdown in the Hole,
Such do they treat those spirits they cannot control;

Like the rest of us who have committed no crime,
But to be a proud Muslim at this point in time,
As the war on his message has reached its full prime,
Giving those who live by it more mountains to climb;

When they saw that in this message he would persist,
They would designate him a global terrorist,
And just like *Quraysh*, they would pound an angry fist,
Before placing his name on their own target list;

Over the skies of Madinah, they'd send a drone,
Distribute 'Wanted' posters with his bearded face shown,
Talk to local tribes, make the reward money known,
For those who capture or kill him and retrieve each bone;

They'd study *Badr* and *Uhud*, learn his strategy,
And profile those who pledged to him under the Tree,
Try to identify his 'Number Two' and 'Three,'
Is it Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, or 'Ali?

To the Prophet's Mosque, they'd send an entire brigade,
To round up the *Ansar* who had given him aid,
To kick down his family's door in a night raid,
To make him the target of their final crusade;

Because his message would still be: 'Bow down to none,
No idol, no tyrant, no oppressive nation,
Keep your heart and mind free from their domination,
True power is with God, so don't fear anyone!'

Imagine if the Prophet was with us today,
If he spoke the same words and lived the same way,
If he returned with the same message to relay,
They'd reserve him a cell at Guantanamo Bay ...

Go to www.freetarek.com to find more of Tarek's talent.

Appendix II: What you can do to help Tarek

There are many things that you and your community can do to support Tarek. Here are some ways in which you can help (taken from www.freetarek.com):

Write a letter to Tarek: writing a letter is one of the simplest ways for you to support and Tarek truly appreciates each letter that he receives. Letters from his supporters help to keep his spirits strong while in isolation. His direct mailing address is:

Tarek Mehanna
ID#50660 Unit GNE-109
Plymouth County Correctional Facility
26 Long pond Road
Plymouth, MA 02360

You can also email your letter to freetarek@gmail.com. It will be printed out and sent to him directly on your behalf.

Raise awareness: you can *spread awareness* about Tarek's case. Help us get the word out: send out emails, print and distribute copies of the information we have on our site, talk to others about Tarek's case.

Know your rights: you can *educate yourselves* and others about your rights. Talking to FBI agents, especially without a lawyer, will never help you. We have a downloadable "[know your rights](#)" pamphlet. We strongly encourage you to read it, distribute it, and act on it.

Donate: you can *donate money* through the Free Tarek site and encourage others to do so as well. All donations help fund the organizing and support for Tarek.

Come out: you can *attend future events and court dates*. We ask that you encourage others to come as well.

Host an event: you can *host an educational event or fundraiser* at your school or in your community. Just contact us and we will help you get an event together.

Take action: you can *participate in pressure campaigns* by making calls, sending faxes or writing letters to the prison and government officials. We will keep you posted about the need for this in the future.

Stay updated: you can *sign up* for our announcement list. This will allow you to receive updates and announcements about Tarek's case, further actions you can take to support him, and the campaign for his release.

Get involved: you can *become actively involved* with the Tarek Mehanna Support Committee. Ask about upcoming meetings and events you can participate in.

Please subscribe to all our social networks ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#)) and keep checking back at the site for the latest updates! For any questions regarding what you can do to help, contact us at: freetarek@gmail.com